

## 英会話術の語類

## TESOL: Teaching Parts of Conversation

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*Abstract: This paper presents a proven approach for providing language students with the skills to be successful conversationalists. It elucidates the advantages of breaking conversation up into parts and explains a step-by-step process for teaching students to ensure they succeed in their attempts to carry on conversations in the target language.*

## 1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges facing teachers of a foreign or second language is to get students conversing in the classroom. Vocabulary, expressions, pronunciation, listening, grammar, and use of appropriate gestures are important skills for effective speaking. Often students of English have gained a good command of these skills yet struggle to carry on a conversation in the target language for any length of time. It is commonly assumed that mastering these skills will naturally enable students to have a conversation. This has had mixed results and experience from years of teaching suggests that this is not the most effective or efficient method to meet the conversation objective.

Current language pedagogy and methodologies promoted by a majority of textbooks fail to incorporate and address a most fundamental component: that for students to be able to carry on a conversation it is necessary to teach how a conversation works by codifying the parts and demonstrating how they interact. This also encourages scaffolding for as students gain confidence in their handling of conversations they find them more interesting and satisfying and are motivated to further build and develop their language

skills to engage in longer and more interesting conversations. Students need to be taught the parts of conversation to be good conversationalists.

## 2. Speaking vs. Conversing

It is often assumed that mastering the various communication skills will lead to fluency similar to one's own native tongue. However the way a conversation flows varies from language to language based on cultural and social norms. Conversation in the students' native tongue may follow patterns much different than the target language and students need to be clued into these. In some cases they may be very similar, but students are often unaware of them as they have been assimilated naturally when learning their home language as a child without having gone through the process of analyzing the structures.

For the purposes of clarification, a distinction is made in this paper between "saying sentences" and "having a conversation," or more simply, "speaking" and "conversing." Students may be able to speak the language by putting the learned words and expressions together in a grammatically correct form with sufficiently good pronunciation to be understood. These oral utterances may express a thought, ask a question, provide information in response to a

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question, make a request, or register a complaint, but this does not mean that a conversation will take place. Students may be communicating, but not necessarily having a conversation. When “speaking” the oral exchange ceases after a short dialog where the information has been relayed, understood, and then abruptly finishes with no need, or desire, to continue. On the other hand, having a conversation involves a give-and-take exchange with each side showing interest in both the content of the conversation (topic) and in the other person with a genuine commitment to help the conversation move along smoothly and a desire to continue as long as time allows or as long as appropriate (often subject to cultural norms).

### 3. Rudiments of Conversation

The accepted rules for conversation in English may be quite different from that of the students’ native tongue frustrating their efforts to continue a conversation for any length of time. Sometimes students know some pieces of the conversation puzzle, but they are unsure of how to put them together. It is necessary to teach how conversation in English flows together for students to create and develop a conversation.

As a first step, students need to be clued into what constitutes a good conversation providing them with a simple foundation to build upon. These may or may not be the same as in their native tongue, or maybe students have simply never given them much thought, therefore it is important to affirm and reinforce their understanding. Emphasizing that a conversation between two people is a two-way exchange is the first step. If one person is asking all the questions and the other is simply answering, this would be a one-way exchange, and this type of exchange is not so much a conversation but more resembles a kind of oral quiz or survey. The second step would be to convey that a conversation should be both give and take. Both speakers should show interest in the conversation (the

topic or subject matter) and in the other person by asking questions and providing more information and detail. This back and forth creates a natural pulse or rhythm that pushes the conversation forward as more common ground is found between the speakers increasing interest as it gains momentum.

### 4. Parts of Conversation

Since conversation tends to follow prescribed patterns, it is effective to break the art of conversation down into parts and teach these interrelated pieces to the students. These parts may also be conceptualized as conversation techniques. Once students are aware of these parts, or pieces, they will better understand how they fit together to create a naturally smooth flow to their conversations.

Conversations in English can be split into many small parts, however for the average English language learner it is most beneficial to keep it simple, especially in the first stages of development, and package the pieces into large chunks. The key parts of conversation that students need to internalize in the beginning may be codified as follows: Follow-up Questions (FQ), Informative Answers (IA), Returning the Question (RQ), Rejoinders (REJ), and Fillers (FIL). After students have had ample practice with these parts of conversation and are comfortable using them, they can be encouraged to think a little more in detail about how a conversation works. The teacher will need to help with this deeper analysis as explained below while introducing the following parts of conversation: Topic Questions (TQ), Volunteering Information (VI), Starters (START), Endings (END), and Topic Changers (TC).

### 5. The Follow-up Question (FQ)

To help students understand what is required of them in constructing a conversation, it is best to start with the Follow-up Question. To do this it is useful to clarify the difference between vertical and horizontal

exchange. A horizontal exchange is when the questions following the initial question change the topic each time in a horizontal, linear format. For example:

A: What sport do you like?

B: I like to play tennis.

A: What's your favorite food?

B: I like to eat Italian pasta.

A: Did you study yesterday?

B: Yes.

Horizontal exchanges would be an example of "speaking the language" rather than having a bona fide conversation. They are shallow, uncreative, unimaginative, and quickly become boring.

A vertical exchange is when the questions following the initial question continue to ask for more detailed information about the same topic delving deeper into the subject in a vertical progression. For example:

A: What sport do you like?

B: I like to play tennis.

A: Where do you play tennis?

B: At school or in a park near my house.

A: Who do you usually play with?

B: With some classmates.

A: When do you play?

B: Usually on Wednesday afternoon and weekends.

Follow-up questions usually use "wh-question words" (including "how") for example: what, where, when, who, why, which, how long, how much, how many, how often, how far, etc.

A good exercise to start with to make this point clear is to conduct an icebreaker type exercise where students need to circulate and find other students who like the same things. Each student receives a list of topics (favorite sport, music, television show, pet, etc.) and they must ask simple yes-no questions to other students to find out if they have the same

interests. In this exercise, students do not ask "what" questions commonly found in textbooks as in "What sport do you like?" but they first think about what sport they like best, and if it is tennis, then the question is "Do you like tennis?" or "Do you like to play tennis?" When a student answers "yes" to the question they write that student's name on their list next to the topic. After students have had time to circulate, explain to the students that while they may have found out something new about their classmates, the interaction with their classmates was very short and not very interesting due to the horizontal exchange.

Begin the second part of the exercise by brainstorming types of "wh-questions" on the board to provide students with something to refer to. Then have them pick two or three topics from their list, and write follow-up questions on those topics that they are curious about or want to know more about. This should come relatively easily to the students since these are interests that they themselves have. Students then partner with another classmate on their list thereby ensuring that they have a common interest to talk about and proceed by asking their original follow-up questions to their partner. Afterwards students can easily understand that this type of vertical exchange was more meaningful and interesting as they probed deeper into the topic revealing more information as it relates to their partner and themselves. They even may have made a new friend or found someone they can relate to in the class and maybe would like to get to know better, further reinforcing the advantages of this type of exchange.

## 6. The Informative Answer (IA)

Once students are able to quickly produce follow-up questions they are ready to move on to the Informative Answer. Giving a good informative answer simply requires thinking of what one would like to ask as a follow-up question and volunteering

that information by adding it to their answers without their conversation partner needing to use a follow-up question to ask for it. The type of information students provide will again usually be directly related to (but not necessarily limited to) the wh-questions by adding information about where, when, why, with whom, how often, how long etc. something was/is/will be done in the past, present, or future.

How much and how complex the information added will be determined by the students' current language abilities but this does not mean that it is limited to more advanced students. The sooner students understand these parts of conversation and are comfortable using them, the sooner they will be able to progress more rapidly and take control of their own learning by concentrating on vocabulary, expressions, and grammar to better explain themselves. An informative answer to the question "What did you do last weekend?" could range from "I went shopping with my friend," for a beginning student to "I went shopping at a department store with my friend and I bought a new bag that was on sale and my friend bought a sweater," for more advanced students.

## 7. Returning the Question (RQ)

By simply using the two conversation techniques presented above, students are well on their way to having a good conversation in English. However, with the exchange limited to these two, it does not necessarily guarantee a two-way, give-and-take exchange that is the hallmark of an interesting and satisfying conversation. One more critical element needs to be added.

It is called Returning the Question and is a very simple, yet useful, part of conversation to keep things moving along. The students simply need to learn the questions "How about you?" or "What about you?" Using these questions ensures that the same person is not asking all the questions and the other person

simply answering, but that there is mutual interest in each other in a more natural two-way exchange. Once again it should be emphasized that for a conversation to be interesting and satisfying to all parties it is important to show interest in the other person(s) and give them a chance to add their own information about the topic. Returning the question can also be relied upon as a backup in case a student cannot think of a good follow-up question to keep the conversation flowing since returning the question serves the same purpose when substituted for a follow-up question.

## 8. Rejoinders (REJ)

Another important part of conversation is the Rejoinder. Rejoinders are reactions showing emotions or feelings to the information or news provided by the speaker. They can be divided into categories, and the phrases from each category taught to the students to practice until they are comfortable using and saying them naturally with feeling. The main categories for rejoinders would be: happy (good news), sad (bad news), surprised (surprising news), interested (interesting news), and encouragement (eliciting more news). The number of phrases and terms to teach to the class will depend on the teacher and the level of the students, however it is best to initially start with just two or three of the most common ones, for example: happy - great, wonderful; sad - that's too bad, I'm sorry to hear that; surprised - you're kidding, I can't believe it; interested - oh yeah, is that so; encouragement - go on, yeah. Initially it is useful to practice correct pronunciation of the expressions and to ensure correct intonation. Most happy and surprised expressions are emphasized with the last sound raised, as if ending in an exclamation point. The sad expressions normally end with a dropping or lowering of the voice at the end. Interested and encouragement expressions vary somewhat, but are usually pretty flat. Explain to the students that they shouldn't worry too much about the correct intonation,

but to let their feelings show through their voice resulting in a natural and proper pitch. To provide practice in these phrases it is useful to distribute a mixed list of statements that convey happy, sad, surprising, etc. information that students must read to their partner who should respond appropriately, first referring to a list of expressions and then from memory.

## 9. Conversation Flow Diagram

Once students have practiced these parts of conversation, they are ready to put them together. This can be done by giving the students a topic question such as “What did you do last weekend?” and providing an outline of the ensuing conversation they are to construct in a conversation flow diagram for use as a kind of template to rely on. For example:

A: What did you do last weekend?

B: IA + RQ

A: IA + FQ

B: IA

A: FQ

B: IA + FQ

A: IA

B: REJ

It is useful to initially end with a rejoinder as this is not only an easy place to use one, but also brings closure to the conversation. Once students are more comfortable in their conversations, they can be encouraged to use the rejoinders at anytime during them, especially using the encouragement expressions.

An example conversation at a basic level following the conversation flow diagram presented above would be:

A: What did you do last weekend?

B: I went shopping with my friend. (IA) How about you? (RQ)

A: I stayed home and studied. (IA) Where did you go shopping? (FQ)

B: We went to a store near my house. We went by bicycle. (IA)

A: How long did you shop? (FQ)

B: We shopped for 3 hours. I was very tired. (IA)

What did you study? (FQ)

A: I studied math. I couldn't finish my homework. (IA)

B: That's too bad. (REJ)

## 10. Fillers (FIL)

After students have had practice with conversation flow diagrams, it is time to introduce fillers. In their conversations students probably noticed that there were some uncomfortable gaps, or pauses, where they had to think awhile before responding or adding extra information. If no sound is produced during these gaps, a certain amount of tension is created because the person asking the question is not sure whether the silence means that the question was not understood, that their partner did not hear them, that their partner is done and has nothing more to say, or even that their partner has lost interest and is distracted by something else. Point out that this is especially a problem when talking on the phone or in situations when the other person cannot be seen. Most likely the students naturally filled these pauses with fillers from their own language. The students simply need to be taught similar expressions in English. Prefacing a pause with “Let me see,” or “Let me think,” helps to alleviate any tension signaling that a pause is coming and the person is still interested and actively engaged. Other fillers would be (usually saying the words or making the sounds deliberately and slowly): uuhhh, mmmm, well, actually.

## 11. Improving a Conversation

Once students have had ample practice in creating conversations following a flow diagram using all the conversation parts or techniques studied, it is a good time to introduce the Improving a Conversation exercise. This serves a number of purposes. First, it

forces students to analyze a conversation and really think about what is going on and how to fit the parts of conversation together. The written form of this exercise facilitates this. Second, students are exposed to a variety of possibilities and directions a conversation may take when listening to other students' ideas broadening their understanding of how conversations can be pieced together. Finally, the teacher has empirical evidence of how well the students are doing and can easily assess their understanding of the parts of conversation and clear up any misconceptions or address any problems the students may be having in usage.

Start the exercise by providing pairs of students with a sample conversation that is intentionally a bad example. The following is a conversation that has been used with success in a variety of classes at many different levels. Of course the situation, countries, and nationalities may be changed to suit the teacher and class.

*Situation: A is an American living in New York. B is a Japanese student traveling in the United States for the first time. B asked A for help buying a ticket at a station, and now they begin a conversation.*

A: So, where are you from?

B: Japan.

A: Why did you come to the U.S.?

B: To sightsee.

A: How long will you stay?

B: For 2 weeks.

A: What do you do in Japan?

B: I'm a student.

A: Oh, what are you studying?

B: Technology.

A: How do you like New York so far?

B: I like it.

A: Well, I have to get going. Enjoy your stay.

B: Thank you.

First, pairs of students read the conversation together and answer the following two questions: Does this conversation sound natural? (students should provide reasons if they are advanced enough, otherwise yes or no is sufficient) and How can this conversation be improved? (students should write out their ideas – lower level students will most likely resort to listing the conversation techniques they have studied so far). The teacher can go over these with the class to get feedback and get the students clearly thinking along the right track, especially if they need extra help.

Second, have the pair make the conversation more interesting by adding to the conversation. They must keep the same pattern of the conversation. Make sure students understand that they cannot subtract anything from the conversation or change it in anyway except to add to it to make it more interesting and natural. Preferably, the two people, A and B, should end up as friends (how students work it out is up to them – they are free to continue the conversation if they want). This part will take a lot of time as students tend to really immerse themselves in the exercise. On the other hand it is necessary to set a time limit to make sure students finish up writing and bring the conversation to completion. A minimum of 45 minutes is recommended. When finished, the students should read their conversation together to check that it sounds natural.

The third part of the exercise can either be done together as a whole class with pairs reading their improved conversations as each student in the class listens and evaluates, or they can exchange their conversations with another pair and evaluate the conversation as they read through it together. The evaluation basically serves the purpose of getting students to identify the parts of conversation and note usage by having them count the number of times each technique (FQ, IA, RQ, REJ, FIL) was used. When conducted as a whole class exercise it helps the



students to remain focused and to concentrate on the information.

Finally, if time allows, have students write or orally make suggestions for further improving the conversations they listened to or read. If written, the paper should be returned to the original authors for them to discuss, and if time permits, make any changes to their conversation by incorporating the suggestions. The teacher can collect the papers in the end to check understanding, spot problems, and possibly provide further feedback in a later lesson.

A partial example of how the conversation could be improved would be:

A: So, where are you from?

B: I'm from Japan. I'm a university student. I'm on spring break now. (IA) How about you? (RQ)

A: I'm from here. I work at a restaurant in the city. Why did you come to the U.S.?

B: I'm interested in American sports and music. I also wanted to sightsee. I wanted to see the Statue of Liberty most. (IA) Does your restaurant have Japanese food? (FQ)

A: Yes, we have a sushi corner. Here's my card with directions to the restaurant. You should drop by.

B: Great! (REJ) I hope I have time. (Comment)

A: How long will you stay in New York?

B: Well . . . (FIL) I'll be here for 3 days and in the U.S. for 2 weeks. I will go to Nashville the day after tomorrow. (IA)

## 12. Topic Questions (TQ)

The Topic Question is an easy concept for the students to grasp since it has previously been used. Up to now, the Topic Questions were provided by the teacher, for instance, "What did you do last weekend?" or "Where are you from?" as in the examples above. The students simply need to be made aware that a question used in this manner is a conversation part serving the purpose of introducing a subject and providing an easy way to begin talking

about it. From this point on students should be encouraged to think of their own topic questions, or for lower level classes the teacher may want to provide a list of questions for students to choose from.

The teacher should take this opportunity to ensure that students know what topics would be considered "safe" that can be used almost anywhere in any situation, and topics or questions that would be considered rude or too personal. Since these are often cultural, it cannot be taken for granted that students automatically know them. For example safe topics/questions might be: weather, recent news, where are you from, what do you do, can you speak Japanese, are you a baseball fan, etc. Topics/questions to avoid might be: finances, religion, politics, dress and physical features, how old are you, are you married, are you rich, what are you doing now, etc.

## 13. Volunteering Information (VI)

Volunteering Information is a simple part of conversation that is quite similar to the Informative Answer. The difference is that it is not added to or tacked on to a response to a question asked by the other speaker and therefore serves a different purpose. Since conversation requires the investment of a certain amount of openness and trust, a good way to establish this is to volunteer some information about oneself first before asking about the other person or before presenting a topic question. For example, by offering the voluntary information: "I'm a student from Japan. I'm going to Montreal for vacation. Where are you going?" helps immediately establish a good relation as opposed to suddenly asking "Where are you going?" or "Where are you from?" Students can practice using Volunteering Information after they have learned what topics are safe as a way to introduce a topic they are comfortable with or particularly interested in. Volunteering information keeps things friendly, establishes trust, and shows a commitment to the conversation signaling to the other

person that it will be worth their while to engage, at least for a short time.

#### 14. Starters (START) and Endings (END)

Usually students will have already mastered these two parts of conversation since they are most commonly taught in the beginning stages of language instruction. Starters are normally greetings, and endings are the expressions used when leaving and saying goodbye. The process outlined here did not begin with these expressions because, besides students having most likely already learned these terms, they are somewhat awkward to use without something of substance inserted between them. The standard textbook presentation and ensuing practice is to provide a short self-introduction, often limited to one's name and nationality, sandwiched between the greeting and leave taking making it a superficial "conversation." However, by incorporating these expressions at this time students are able to make more meaningful and realistic use of them now that they are more confident with their conversations and know how to carry them forward by inserting something more substantial between the starter and ending. After reviewing the common expressions used in this part of conversation, encourage students to always begin and end with them. Make sure to provide a variety and verse the students in the appropriate situations where they should be used taking into consideration social register, the formality or informality of the situation, or even how they happen to be feeling at the time.

Starters are not always greetings. They may be simple comments on the weather or observation on a mutual situation (e.g. standing in a slow-moving line) that leads to small talk which then leads to a more intimate and gratifying conversation of substance. The types of greetings and comments taught by the teacher will depend upon the level of the class. Useful starters might be: hi, how's it going, what's up, how

are you (doing), I hope this doesn't take too long (I'm in a hurry), I hope it doesn't rain (I don't have an umbrella), and that's an interesting xxx. Endings might be: see you, goodbye, good luck, have a good time, take care, and I've got to run, I'm late.

#### 15. Topic Changers (TC) and Dealing With Misunderstandings

Often students are hesitant to engage in a conversation because they are afraid they will not be understood, or that they may not understand the other speaker. To alleviate these fears and to help students feel more comfortable participating in conversations with the self-assurance that they will be successful, another skill set needs to be added. Topic Changers, as the name implies, are phrases that help students to switch to another topic. This is an important piece of the conversation puzzle adding a new dimension to students' conversations providing them with more control and boosting confidence.

Students should first realize that misunderstandings and miscommunications can happen to native language speakers as well and that they should not feel embarrassed or that their language ability is not good enough. In this situation we sometimes simply write it off as being on different wavelengths. In the beginning, students should be encouraged to be cheerful and enjoy their conversations without taking things too seriously to prevent getting entangled in conversations at a level too complex for them. Having the ability to easily extract oneself from a potentially awkward situation is an important skill that helps students to loosen up.

Topic changing expressions might be: by the way, did you hear that, so, you know, etc. These expressions may be used when one of the speakers in the conversation has no more to say on a specific topic or is not interested in the topic and wishes to change to another topic that might be more interesting.



Of course they need to be sensitive to the other person and not change the topic too quickly or abruptly. Explain that a certain amount of exchange should occur on the initial topic to show solidarity before the topic changer is used.

When a student wishes to change the topic because it is too difficult for them or they suddenly find that they can no longer follow along, it is a good idea to add an expression before the topic changer to clue the other person in as to what is going on. Some useful expressions might be: (I'm sorry) I can't explain it well, it's difficult for me (to understand), I don't get it. In most situations these should not be used alone, for if nothing further is added the speaker may persist in trying to explain in more detail adding to the confusion and making the situation more stressful. Letting the other person know that the conversation has stalled, either because of difficulty or loss of interest, and that the participant has the flexibility to branch off on to another topic keeps the conversation lighthearted and easygoing.

## 16. Constructing a Complex Conversation

Students should be encouraged to practice all the parts of conversation in a variety of ways by changing the order of the flow diagram. With practice, and brief comments by the teacher reviewing the importance and function of each part, students will learn to piece their conversations together in different ways. A flow diagram at this stage would be more complex, possibly looking something like this:

A: START + VI + TQ

B: START + IA + FQ

A: IA + RQ

B: FIL + IA

A: REJ + FQ

B: IA + RQ

A: IA + TC

B: FIL + IA + RQ

(Etc.)

A: END

B: END

## 17. Keep It Simple

Not all of these parts of conversation need to be taught to the students, and some can be combined into larger chunks. It is important that the students' abilities be kept in mind and to not give them too much information or material too quickly so that they become confused and bogged down. The first 5 parts of conversation as noted in section 4 above provide the foundation and may be all that a particular class will be able to work with at their present level. The other parts may be introduced as students become better conversationalists and show interest in continuing their conversations for longer periods.

The teacher may choose to break the parts up differently, combine the parts in different ways, and even add more parts depending upon the students' abilities. Whatever makes the most sense and is easy for the students to assimilate at their level should be the rule to follow. However the method outlined here has been used successfully at a variety of levels and has proven to be effective in getting students to better understand what constitutes a conversation and how to manipulate and control it enabling them to enjoy their conversations more.

## 18. Conclusion

By practicing these techniques in the class students gain the confidence needed to strike up a conversation in English since they are better able to predict the progression of the conversation and can steer the conversation to suit their needs and ability or to a format they are more comfortable with. As students understand the parts of conversation and how to piece them together they naturally become better conversationalists. Confidence and control allow students to relax and enjoy their conversations.

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